# Asad Rehman's leadership marks a new era in intersectional climate activism



Each weekday morning in 1970s Burnley, a group of South Asian children would walk to school together for safety. Among them was Asad Rehman, who had moved from Pakistan at age four. The children faced daily racial harassment, including Nazi salutes and racist insults from classmates, and even the distribution of far-right literature within school halls. The hostile environment forced them to band together, barricading themselves in classrooms at lunchtime to avoid attacks. This early experience of racialised violence sparked Rehman’s first involvement in organising when he and his peers collectively refused to attend school in protest, insisting their environment was unsafe. These formative moments ingrained a core belief in Rehman: strength lies in collective action and organisation, with a unifying vision.

Rehman’s commitment to justice would define his career trajectory. After university, he joined grassroots anti-racism groups in East London such as the Newham Monitoring Project, which was engaged in community casework and campaigning against far-right violence. He later worked with Amnesty International UK where he championed economic and social rights alongside civil and political rights—an expansion that reflected his broader social justice outlook. By the late 1990s, his activism intersected with the burgeoning counter-globalisation movement, exposing him to international voices warning of climate breakdown and its impacts, including displacement and agricultural crises. This realisation that climate change would unravel hard-won social gains drove him to integrate environmental and social justice causes.

In 2006, Rehman joined Friends of the Earth, at a time when most environmental organisations viewed climate change as a distant threat. Friends of the Earth was pioneering a climate justice framework that linked environmental degradation directly with racism and inequality—an approach Rehman championed globally, elevating voices from the Global South. Despite pushback from political figures uncomfortable with his uncompromising stance, he persisted in framing environmental struggle as inseparable from human rights and anti-racism efforts. This intersectional narrative has since become central to progressive environmentalism.

Rehman’s leadership roles continued at War on Want, a trade union-backed anti-poverty campaign where he broadened the coalition of social justice and environmental activists. In August 2025, he returned to Friends of the Earth as its first person of colour to lead the organisation in its over 50-year history. With a membership exceeding 250,000 and more than 230 local action groups, Friends of the Earth is the UK’s largest environmental campaigning network. Historically viewed as less radical than some peers, Rehman’s appointment signals a renewed commitment to activism that tackles climate change, systemic inequality, and the far right in tandem.

Rehman emphasises mobilisation and community organising as central to his vision. Building on Friends of the Earth’s extensive grassroots base, he aims to create a movement that not only addresses ecological issues but also confronts the divisions sowed by economic disparities and racial injustice. He reflects: “We’re being offered nothing but division and hatred. We have to provide an answer for them. Friends of the Earth is going to be in the forefront of that.” His approach reflects the organisation’s longstanding commitment to environmental justice, explicitly recognising how marginalised communities bear the brunt of ecological harm and systemic oppression.

This broad, justice-centered philosophy aligns with campaigns addressing the displacement of climate refugees, highlighted in coalition efforts like the 2017 Climate Refugees conference, which Rehman helped shape. There, he called for a new narrative rooted in empathy and collective responsibility to tackle the growing crisis affecting over 140 million displaced people worldwide due to climate-related disasters.

Friends of the Earth's renewed drive under Rehman comes at a time when political landscapes are shifting leftward, as seen in the recent leadership of the Green Party by Zack Polanski, who praised Rehman as “a keen voice in the climate movement” adept at linking economic and climate justice globally. While some colleagues note Rehman’s strengths lie more in high-level campaigning than grassroots organising, his ability to unite diverse social and environmental justice causes is widely recognised as vital for the movement’s future.

Rehman’s journey from a child navigating racial violence in Burnley to the helm of the UK’s largest environmental campaigning network embodies the evolution of climate activism itself—one that understands the climate crisis as inseparable from systemic injustice. His leadership signals a future where environmentalism and social equity are pursued hand in hand, seeking transformative solutions to the intertwined challenges facing communities in the UK and worldwide.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[4]](https://truthout.org/articles/climate-stories-environment-colonial-legacies-and-systemic-change/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[4]](https://truthout.org/articles/climate-stories-environment-colonial-legacies-and-systemic-change/), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[2]](https://friendsoftheearth.uk/latest/friends-earth-appoints-new-chief-executive), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[3]](https://friendsoftheearth.uk/about/climate-justice-and-antiracism)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[3]](https://friendsoftheearth.uk/about/climate-justice-and-antiracism), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.campaigncc.org/nationalconference), [[6]](https://www.campaigncc.org/climaterefugeeconference2017), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/latest/friends-earth-appoints-new-chief-executive> - Friends of the Earth announced the appointment of Asad Rehman as their new chief executive, effective August 2025. Rehman, previously the organisation's head of international climate campaigning until 2017, returns after serving as executive director for War on Want. He brings nearly four decades of experience in campaigning for environmental, social, and racial justice, with a deep understanding of how these struggles are interconnected. Rehman is the first person of colour to lead Friends of the Earth in its more than 50-year history.
3. <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/about/climate-justice-and-antiracism> - Friends of the Earth is committed to addressing the climate and nature crisis through an anti-racist lens. The organisation acknowledges that marginalised communities, especially people of colour, are disproportionately affected by environmental issues. They actively oppose racism and exploitation, standing in solidarity with movements challenging oppression. Their work includes demanding fair climate action, fighting deforestation and exploitation, pushing for racial justice, and exposing environmental injustices that impact people of colour the most.
4. <https://truthout.org/articles/climate-stories-environment-colonial-legacies-and-systemic-change/> - Asad Rehman, Senior Campaigner at Friends of the Earth, reflects on his upbringing in Burnley, Lancashire, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. He discusses the pervasive racist violence faced by the South Asian community and the failure of state institutions to respond effectively. This experience led him to engage in anti-racist organising, aiming to build community resistance and address issues of power, privilege, and class. Rehman highlights the importance of black-led movements and the need for accountability within social justice initiatives.
5. <https://www.campaigncc.org/nationalconference> - The Campaign against Climate Change and Friends of the Earth, supported by various trade unions and civil society organisations, organised a conference titled 'Climate Refugees – The Climate Crisis and Population Displacement: Building a Trade Union and Civil Society Response' on 11 February 2017. The conference addressed the displacement of over 140 million people due to climate-related disasters in the preceding six years and discussed strategies for a unified response to the climate migration crisis.
6. <https://www.campaigncc.org/climaterefugeeconference2017> - At the 'Climate Refugees – The Climate Crisis and Population Displacement' conference on 11 February 2017, Asad Rehman emphasised the need for a new narrative based on justice, empathy, and humanity to address the climate migration crisis. He highlighted the displacement of over 140 million people due to climate-related disasters in the past six years and the escalating risks in the coming decades, urging for a collective response to the crisis.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/03/asad-rehman-journey-from-antiracism-campaigner-in-burnley-to-head-of-friends-of-the-earth> - Asad Rehman, appointed chief executive of Friends of the Earth in August 2025, reflects on his journey from an anti-racism campaigner in Burnley to leading the UK's largest environmental campaigning network. He discusses his experiences with racial violence in the 1970s, his work with the Newham Monitoring Project, and his tenure at Amnesty International UK. Rehman highlights the interconnectedness of climate, inequality, and economic systems, emphasising the need for a justice-centred approach to environmental activism.